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ABSTRACT

A case involving the harassment of a female college writing instructor by an older, male student serves as a model to provide a framework for dealing with similar problems in the future. This case moved from initial acts of challenging authority in the classroom and monopolizing office hours to the bizarre: obscene phone calls, mysterious mail, and abusive letters to department heads and academic deans. Four phenomena which can be observed in the institutional treatment of harassment victims are the following: (1) the harasser appropriates the role of victim; (2) the situation is redefined by the appropriation of the victim's role, at which time male discourse patterns are re-established; (3) the harasser, having demonstrated his "plight," can begin validating his behavior through institutional responses; and (4) the female's subjectivity is erased and the issue is dealt with on an exclusively male terrain. These phenomena can be seen, for instance, in the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings. Once this four-step process gets set into motion, the probability that the harassed subject's reality will be denied increases dramatically. Thus, intervention in matters of harassment must be done quickly, at the initial point when a victim brings the problem of harassment to someone else's attention. (Four citations are included; an appendix provides four writing samples which document the cited student-teacher relationship.) (HB)

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Prologue

I truly believe the people to whom I allude--with one notable exception--were acting in what they thought were my best interests. Therein lies the genesis of my essay.

From Textual to Sexual Harassment

Through the filter of sound sleep, you hear the shrill cries of your telephone. As you slough your quilt cocoon and step on your slipper, you pick up the receiver, visualizing a late-night family tragedy. A deep, threatening voice says, "Can I talk to the bitch of the house?" Before you're able to react to your terror, he says, "Are you wearing panties?"

Or you're reclining on your couch under the single, soft pink light of your favorite lamp, reading Bakhtin's Dialogic Imagination as a warm late-May breeze caresses your face. You hear staccato footsteps approach your kitchen window through the alley's night, and then your screen pushes inward and hits the table. You scream, and the footsteps retreat, knife-like, back down the alley.

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Or after you've moved the first time, a police officer calls you at work to tell you the apartment you have recently vacated has been broken into and completely vandalized. The sargeant says all the new occupant's belongings have either been stolen or destroyed. He mentions, in passing, that the tenant, a man in his mid-twenties, has been so traumatized by the violence of the incident that he has quit his job and moved back to his small, rural hometown.

Or you meet with the Chair of your department, an older, kind, intelligent, and caring man, who tells you that the Vietnam veteran in your professional writing course has been removed because he suffers from a classic case of unrequited love. The Chair wraps his arm around your shoulders in what he thinks is a reassuring gesture and continues to tell you that all men in the department love you. The difference, he says, is that none of them will act on their feelings. You are so stunned, you don't remember going home that day.

These four scenarios are very real to me. They happened, along with other incidents too numerous to mention, over the last four years. They began in January, 1988, when a student in his mid-thirties, Don, enrolled in my "Business Writing" course at a major university. Since then, I have been living the consequences of Don's textual/sexual harassment.

One of the most contested sites of communication in the

classroom is that of gender, especially if the instructor is female and the student is male. On April 24, 1991, the Chronicle of Higher Education noted that of 208 female instructors surveyed recently, nearly half of the women stated they had been sexually harassed by male students (A13). Professor Elizabeth Grauerholz, a sociologist at Purdue University, determined that while most harassment was verbal (including sexual comments, innuendo, and body language), one professor had been sexually assaulted by a student. Furthermore, Professor Grauerholz states that sexual harassment is one form of power--that of the instructor over the student--and that because of cultural differences between men and women, women are especially vulnerable to harassment (Grauerholz 797).

A testimony to Grauerholz's findings, my experience, unfortunately, follows a pattern typically seen in cases of harassment. Before I begin recounting some of these events, however, I want to draw a distinction between sexual harassment and sex harassment. In Sexual Harassment of Working Women, Catherine MacKinnon defines sexual harassment as "the unwanted imposition of sexual requirements in the context of a relationship of unequal power" (1). Sex harassment is not yet clearly defined, but is directed at an individual based on that individual's sex, and, at the very least, is manifested by the systematic creation of a hostile work environment. It, too, operates in the context of unequal power. Whereas sexual harassment operates

systemically from top to bottom--for example, from male professor to female student--sex harassment operates systemically from the bottom to the top--from a male student to a female instructor. The difference between sex harassment and sexual harassment is analogous to the difference between sex, a biological determinant, and gender, a socialization process.

My case is noteworthy because it happens to fall into the ill-defined area between overt sexual harassment and covert sex harassment. I will return to this point shortly. Before I do, however, I will briefly describe how Don challenged my power as his instructor.

Almost immediately upon entering my classroom on that fateful day in January, 1988, Don showed signs of anti-feminist behavior and sex harassment. When I introduced the topic of nonsexist language, for example, Done persisted in calling me by my first name or "Mi-z-z-z-z." On his written work, he would write "Mz." instead of "Ms.," even though we had spent class time discussing business protocol when addressing women, and other students had called the "spelling error" to his attention.

Don would consistently cross socially and spatially acceptable boundaries to assert his power. By the third class, he was interrupting me when I spoke, and refocusing attention on himself. If I arrived early for class, which I frequently did, Don would be waiting for me in the student

lounge across the hall from our classroom, where I would stop to drink a cup of coffee. Although Don could see me reading a newspaper or writing, he would insist that I talk to him. On one occasion, he saw me grading papers and said, "Not ready for class, huh? Did you do the reading?" These comments were clearly intended to challenge my authority and my competence. Often, he would rub up against me or touch me when he talked to me.

By the second week of the semester, Don monopolized my scheduled office time, then he demanded that I meet him during non-office hours, hours which were more convenient for him. The incident which culminated in Don's being removed from my course was triggered by his refusal to turn in an assignment--a résumé. He told me that his sister would be submitting her résumé, and he said that if I didn't like it, he'd file a formal complaint against me.

When I told him that his approach would not meet the requirements for the course, he retaliated by arriving at my office when I was preparing for another class. My office hours had ended, and I was sitting at my desk. He threw open the door with enough force to put a slight dent in the wall. Even though I tried to explain that I could not talk to him then, that he had missed my conference time, he became irate and yelled that he would have me dismissed from the university. He struck the wall with his fist, kicked my desk, and shouted obscenities at me.

Shortly after this incident, the Department Chair and

the Director of Professional Writing agreed that Don should be removed from my classroom and "reassigned" to the Director of Professional Writing where he could complete the course as an independent study. Don subsequently met with both men, who later told me that Don had "behaved like a puppy" and that he was "probably embarrassed about his behavior."

They went on to tell me that I had nothing to fear, that Don would "come to his senses and apologize in the near future." Though I desperately wanted to believe what I had been told, my personal contact with Don suggested otherwise.

Within five weeks, a cycle, now all too familiar, began. For approximately three weeks, on an average of two to six times a day, someone would call me and hang up. The caller, after a lapse of several weeks, would escalate to obscene remarks, and then I would receive mysterious or threatening mail. Toward the end of the cycle, cryptic messages, inexplicable objects, and strangers would appear on my doorstep. On several occasions, mail was stolen from my department mailbox. Throughout the cycle, the incidents could never definitively be traced to one individual. However, Don was simultaneously writing vitriolic letters to whomever would read them, or he would leaflet busy locations on campus. Much of the language in Don's written communication was present in the phone calls and the mysterious messages I was receiving.

Careful examination of this pattern shows narrowing of

boundaries and encroachment on my physical well-being. That is why, about halfway through the cycle in the early summer of 1988, I requested a background check on Don. I consulted with the Department Chair, who, I recall, seemed nervous. Nonetheless, he referred me to the Dean of Student Affairs.

At our first meeting, the Dean told me a long anecdote about a young girl whose boyfriend had ripped a gold chain from her neck. I now recognize that the Dean minimized the assault by saying that the boy was upset over the breakup of their relationship, so he "took back" a present he had given to his girlfriend. After listening to the Dean for almost half an hour, I finally asked what had happened with Don's background check. The Dean stuttered and said there was nothing to be concerned about, a few bad checks, a couple of missed support payments, but that was all.

Well, by this time, I had moved in with a roommate, and for the first six weeks or so, my normal life resumed. Then the fall semester, 1988 began, and the department directory circulated in September. Although I had asked that my address and phone number not be listed, I found myself standing in front of the departmental office staring at the directory's pink sheets in disbelief. There were my address and phone number, information available to anyone in the university. Two days later, the phone calls began again.

Within months, Don had written abusive, damaging letters and memoranda to the Director of Professional Writing, the Department Chair, several Deans, and campus and

local newspapers. All of his communications complained of how poorly I had treated him and how I was now harassing him. On one of the fliers distributed campus-wide, he had drawn a caricature of me with a black "N.O.W." armband on my right sleeve (Writing Sample #1). During this time, I continued to get obscene calls, and mysterious mail. When I solicited the advice of the Director of Professional Writing, a person whom I consider a mentor and a friend, he recommended that I not talk to anyone about what was happening in the "best interests of everyone involved."

In the spring of 1989, I moved for the second time, but by November of that same year, I was receiving threatening phone calls. On the early evening of December 12, 1989, I got over twenty vulgar calls, calls so persistent in their violence, that I contacted the police. At the same time, unbeknownst to me, Don was sending a letter to the Dean of Fine Arts (Writing Sample #2). Within the week, two strangers appeared at my door and inquired about my personal life. At this point, I sought help from the university lawyer.

Together, she and I went to the campus police who, at her request, finally checked on Don's background. To my astonishment, we discovered that Don had a lengthy criminal record including convictions for carrying concealed weapons and armed robbery. He also had one arrest for rape.

By now, there was a new Department Chair. She was understanding of my situation, but not apprised of all its

nuances. Nonetheless, she scheduled a meeting to include the Dean of Student Affairs, a representative from the campus police, the Dean of Academic Affairs, herself, and me. When the Dean of Student Affairs was asked why I hadn't been given the information about Don's background I had requested over two years previously, he said, "It was a judgment call. We have to protect our students' rights."

The campus police officer, whom the Chair later dubbed "odious," added that I had best refrain from talking about Don, or "I might find myself on the wrong end of a lawsuit."

I could continue, probably for hours, with a description of these events. To date, I have compiled over three inches worth of correspondence relating to this situation, and I have converted my experience to an ethnographic study which is now well in excess of one hundred pages (Kramer).

But I've written this essay to demonstrate that my experience, although more dramatic than that of women who encounter the phenomenon of harassment, is not at all unusual. It is not unusual in the sense that the sexual component of my being harassed is constituted by Don's history, which includes a record of sexual assault. The unwanted rubbing and touching also fall within the domain of sexual harassment.

Moreover, because I am a woman, because of cultural differences between men and women, I am already defined sexually. In other words, my case--and I would argue the

case of most women who experience similar situations--is a case of sex harassment, not sexual harassment. I have been harassed because I am a woman, a woman with power.

Earlier, I drew the distinction between sexual harassment and sex harassment so we can begin to formulate criteria--and, I hope, eventually laws--with which to equip women so they can deal effectively with their harassers. My case foregrounds the subtleties of sex/ual harassment, subtleties not yet defined as violations of women's rights. Rather, the sex harassment I experienced is of a more insidious nature because Don, a very intelligent man, is "system-savvy." Don uses the system to his advantage, thereby making the system complicitous in the harassment.

Therefore, I have isolated four phenomena which I have observed in the institutional treatment of harassment victims. My hope is that we can use these observations as a point of departure for formulating written guidelines to deal more effectively with harassers.

(1) Appropriation of the Victim's Role

Whenever a female charges a male with sexual or sex harassment, power shifts within institutional hierarchies. With her accusation, the female "victim" usurps traditional power structures and diminishes or negates culturally defined male power over the female. She reconstitutes that power structure by asserting her own power over her male "victimizer." I'm speaking now of male harassers because they are statistically, by far, the most frequent

victimizers. Usually what happens--and happened in my case--is that the harasser, in order to prevent this power shift, appropriates the role of victim. Don, for example, insisted that his rights had been violated by "not having access to my office hours." Don's rhetoric was consistent in that it portrayed him as the victim in a campaign of harassment. Both Chairs of my department and several Deans spent hours in conference with Don indirectly validating his experience by allowing him to perpetuate his "victimization." With an audience of willing listeners, he was "allowed" to reconfigure his power base by making himself the "victim" through a narration of fictitious events.

What happens in actuality, though, is that the female's subjectivity is completely erased, denying her of her experience. Power shifts from the female back to the male along contours more consonant with a male-dominant power model. Another example of this phenomenon occurred during the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings. Once Thomas had appropriated Hill's status as victim by making himself a victim of racism, any power Hill might have had was subjugated by Thomas' assertion.

(2) Re-establishing Male Discourse Patterns

Once the harasser has succeeded in redefining the situation by appropriating the victim's role, he re-establishes a predominantly male discourse pattern. For Don, this step was essential to his maintaining power. Not

only was he hierarchically inferior as the harasser, but he was also hierarchically inferior as a student. As a result, he needed someone from a higher institutional stratum, preferably a male, to sanction his "victimization." Don, for example, was able to redefine himself as the victim and, thereby, call attention to his "plight" within the hierarchy of an already existing male power structure. He had to gain the attention of male power figures who were hierarchically superior to me in order to initiate an exclusively male discourse, a discourse which Don perceived as functioning spatially from top to bottom.

(3) Validation of the Victimizer's "Plight"

Having called attention to his "plight," the harasser can begin validating his behavior within institutional responses. Don used the Chairs and the Deans, for hours on end, on the pretext of talking about his "harassment," to redefine me in terms that are more consistent with female subjugation. You can see this first-hand in the copy of Writing Sample #2 where he has underlined "please control it."

(4) Erasure of the Female's Subjectivity

Finally, when the harasser has vicariously resumed the "male superior position," he is able to talk about power relations and sort them out on exclusively male terrain. Don did this in a meeting with the Dean of Fine Arts in January, 1990. He wrote "an apology" (Writing Sample #3) which he took to the Dean and had the Dean give to me. In

other words, men worked out the problem, agreed to its resolution, and then acted on that resolution. Unfortunately in this process, the female, already displaced, becomes a completely transparent "exchange site."

Anita Hill suffered the same fate. Once Clarence Thomas aggressively redefined the problem as one of racism, he was able to interact, or "bond," with his male "peers" over an issue of power.

I should add that at the same time Don was giving his apology to the Dean of Fine Arts, letters were disappearing regularly from my mailbox; once again, I was getting vicious calls at home; and, written messages castigating my performance as an instructor were being sent to various "officials" on campus. Writing Sample #4 is an example.

What I am saying is that we need to intervene quickly in matters of harassment, and we need to intervene at the initial point when a victim brings the problem of harassment to someone else's attention. Once the four-step process I've described above gets set into motion, the probability that the harassed subject's reality will be denied is much greater. It is also more likely that the male harasser is well on his way to appropriating her experience.

Epilogue

I've moved six times since all of this began in 1988, and the last move was over 1100 miles from where I had been living. On February 5, I arrived home in the early evening

and asked my daughter if there were any messages on the answering machine. She said, "Just one." After pausing for a moment, she said, "Mom, did you really have oral sex last night?"

March, 1992

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Students for **P**rofessionalism in **E**ducators and **C**urriculum

Eleven students have complained that their right to a professional student/instructor relationship has been denied them by a Professor in chemistry 102. The students in Chem. 102, which is a five credit course, a prerequisite in many fields, and critical as a foundation for upper level classes, turned to the professor for assistance in class. His response was that he does not answer questions in class. After class the students were told to go to their T.A.s and as the course progressed the professor made it clear he would not be bothered by students. Finally, exam averages and confusion about course material forced the students to voice their concerns. The apathetic professor told them that if they

A complaint from this damn undergrad. The idiot has been here three times this year asking me to teach him something. I'll get rid of him. If he squawks, who they gonna believe? Him or me?
Yes I know. I've had to turn mine away in droves. It's really quite annoying. Say have our checks come in yet?
Professor Don BoTherme
CHEM 102
Ms. Meme First Business Writing TA
Ms. Maine's Back

didn't like it they should write a letter and then, incredibly, he added that they may then lose more points. While this individual's arrogant, and unethical conduct is unusually blatant, it is indicative of a growing lack of regard for the undergraduate's right to the professional instruction they have paid for. We do not need these childish ego-centrics and published prima donnas that are hired to increase departmental prestige. We need instructors whose character and psychological makeup are such that an effort will be made to provide no nonsense instruction in an atmosphere conducive to a positive learning experience. In short we need professionalism in the classroom.

The departments all provide evaluation forms at the end of the year which they retain. This is the fox guarding the chicken coop. Our student group has compiled an extensive list of evaluations of instructors throughout the campus and we urge you to add to the list. Call in evaluations on your instructors at . Call anytime and simply leave the name of your instructor, your complaint or praise, and your name and number (optional) on the tape. If you want an evaluation of an instructor leave the name of the instructor and your number. We will call you if we have any information. There are no fees or responsibilities and your anonymity will be respected. Protect your rights; call .

Dear Sir

On Dec 5 1989 I walked to the cafeteria to eat. Kramer and a young man were just entering the kitchen area. I kept walking. The young man ran out of the kitchen area, faced me for several moments then returned. It doesn't matter any more if you believe me. Since the day I left that class 1 & 1/2 years ago Kramer has conducted herself professionally in front of faculty, included yourself, but in the halls, dining areas, library and etc. I've had to put up with constant snide remarks, scowls, glares, and harassment from Kramer and a few friends. You see her as above this. I can do nothing about that. So too she seemed to me. I tell you one last time. It is she who began it. It is she who lied to you about it. It is she who continues it. It is she who violated your intent to resolve it. I know it makes no sense, particularly at first. I tried many times to ignore it, to resolve it. I don't know how to play these academic politics--The stuff of superior intellects I suppose-- I, like a fool, have reacted openly, angrily. I don't defend that. I realize there is no way you can accept this of your friend and colleague. You can think nothing else but that I am overreacting, paranoid or nuts. I don't care anymore. think that. I just ask that she treat me with the same indifference that she does in front of people. I have failed classes and tests as a result of this harrassment. I have tried to avoid. I do not go to the library, the dining areas, snack bar, colloquiums or any place else where I might encounter this individual. I have asked her if we could forget it. I ask you one last time for lack of any other recourse within the English department ~~and~~ to please influence your friend to leave me alone and to, above all, insure that ~~the~~ her young man never, never makes a physical move towards me again. You give this person power, please control it. She does not have the integrity to do so herself. I can think of no way to handle it. I am not leaving. I have earned the right to be here.

I understand this woman is a superior intellect and an invaluable asset to this school. She has earned her position. I ask no recourse, confrontations, communication, nothing. Just that it stops. I have tried to ignore it for a year and a half. Now it is becoming physically threatening.

1/28/90

Dear Ms. Kramer:

It is my hope that by giving this message to Professor it will be a more effective amendment to the mistake I made in your class. I can think of few things in my life which I regret more than the disagreement I had with you. For my part in any embarrassment or discomfort you have suffered, I sincerely apologize.

I can offer you little in the way of explanation. At some point I decided I was not getting any return on certain intangibles despite the respect, cooperation and etc. I was showing you. I concluded that it was because you were a "feminist" and began feeling somewhat betrayed. I'm not trying to validate my behavior. In retrospect my expectations were unrealistic, my conclusions simplistic and my response juvenile. Since I could not articulate the above I instead, focused on, and unfairly blew out of proportion, relatively insignificant matters. At the time I thought I was protecting myself and never realized I could actually affect you. I'm sorry.

Sincerely,

April 8, 1990

Dear :

I am an undergrad who has recently taken the English proficiency examination. I am concerned about who grades them. Two years ago I complained about a relatively insignificant matter, the inaccessability of a writing instructor. Since then I have been harassed, ostracized and lied about by the instructor, I have been intimidated by male faculty who think they are protecting their reference group, I have had my files rifled for damaging information, I have had information extrapolated from creative writing assignments and used against me and I have, in general, been talked to and treated like an animal by members of your department.

I have never so much as spoken to these people harshly, or in any way threatened or demeaned them except to legally complain to the appropriate members of the department, openly and in writing, about the incident and the subsequent harassment. I realize that, to you, this is a community of open intellectuals, incapable, if only through disinterest, of this kind of subterfuge. I do not ask that you believe me, only that some reasonable precaution be taken to insure that I am not graded by someone who bears malice towards me.

These people have succeeded. I have altered my plans. I no longer take classes in your department. All I ask now is the indifference they profess. In the past each time I have tried contact such as this the covert harassment has increased. As a last effort to gain the protection denied me by the leadership of this university, I have decided to go to the . I have enclosed a rough draft of the letter in the hopes that you will better understand the nature of my predicament.

I sincerely regret that my only contact with you has been of this distasteful nature.

Respectfully,